The Iniquitous Undertaker: Legends of Oscar and Mary Fischer

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Edwards, Emily D. "The Iniquitous Undertaker: Legends of Oscar and Mary Fischer." Southern Folklore 55.1 (1998): 43-62.

Article:

Although a few contemporary media accounts such as Night Shift (1982), My Girl (1991), and the short-lived television series Frank's Place (1987- 88) offer more humanized portraits of the undertaker, conventional stereotypes portray a distrust of the strangers who have assumed the grim job once the domain of family and close friends. As discussed in this article, the grotesque oral narratives about two undertakers who owned and operated a funeral home in Florence, Alabama, can be classified as urban legends (Brunvand 1989:325) which function to relate an unease about strange places, such as a mortuary and funeral home, and a distrust of strangers (Lindahl 1986:15), especially those people who would choose undertaking as an occupation (Quigley 1996:310). What is particularly interesting about the cycle of oral narratives regarding the Fischers, the directors of the funeral home, is that while some aspects of these stories can be verified, much of the material clearly functions as contemporary legend, implementing stereotypes, attempts at authentication, and film noir flavor (de Vos 1996). Though the narratives may reflect the uncertainty of a small town's rapid transition from rural to urban culture in the first decades of the twentieth century, the uninterrupted changes and innovations of modern life keep the Fischer legends germane for a more contemporary audience. Finally, modern funeral practices replaced the family tradition of caring for the dead that belonged to an earlier, agricultural community. The corpse and those that attended it became relegated to the discourse of urban legends and popular culture portrayals.

Figure 1. The house on the corner of Cherry and Tombigbee Streets is a large, unexceptional structure—nothing overtly reveals that this had once been a funeral parlor.

A cursory examination of the setting for the strange stories about the Fischers, a house on the corner of Cherry and Tombigbee streets in Florence, Alabama, shows a large but unexceptional structure built in the nineteenth century [see Figure 1]. It seems a straightforward building, substantial and tangible. Though the house is hardly cozy, there is no real clue that it had once been a funeral parlor, When my family bought this house in the 1950s, the structure had already been converted to an apartment building and seemed to be nothing more than good investment property with furnished units to be rented, chiefly to students attending the nearby university. My mother bought the house knowing its history-, hut chose to forget about it and was somewhat successful in suppressing the stories or at least keeping them from her children. I spent many hours as a teenager helping to clean and paint apartments between tenants and never heard any of the stories until I was an adult. I do recall showing an upstairs unit to a prospective tenant who told me very forcefully that she found the whole place depressing and wouldn't live in any of the units. At the time / didn't know the house had been a funeral home and had never heard the legends associated with its previous owners. I was hurt by this woman's criticisms, especially since I had just finished painting the upstairs apartment and thought it looked exceptionally bright and cheerful.

I first heard the legend of the building's previous owners, Oscar and Mary Fischer, from my brother in 1982, after we were both grown and my brother was in the process of purchasing the building from my mother. He renovated and moved into the large bottom floor unit, while continuing to manage the other apartments.[2] The unusual history of the building came to him through a plumber and handyman named M. Byrd', whom my brother hired to do some minor repairs on the old house. We have since heard similar versions from some of the elderly neighbors and long-time residents of Tombigbee and Cherry streets. Another account, from M. Florentine (1997), corresponds very closely with the story Mr. Byrd told. Mr. Byrd revealed that the building had once been a funeral parlor. The large first floor apartment where my brother lived had been the chapel. Here the Fischers put the dearly departed on display for their loved ones. The handyman then explained how the Fischers ran their business on Tombigbee Street. It was an enterprise supposedly shunned by wealthier families of the area. However, because the Fischers were less expensive than other funeral homes, their business was actively patronized by the tenant farmers, East Florence mill workers, and solid country folk of Lauderdale county.

> This place belonged to Mary and Oscar Fischer back in the twenties. Oscar and Mary were undertakers. They ran a funeral business here 'til-1941. I think it was sometime along there. Maybe around the time of the war. They were crooks and got found out when they went to bury a girl not much older'n a child. She was the daughter of a farmer and they brought her to the Fischers for laying out. The family was a poor one, but the little girl's mother bought a special dress for her daughter to wear and told Mrs. Fischer how she wanted the girl dressed for her funeral. She said how she wanted her girl's hair done and how she should look. When the mother came back to see her daughter laid out, the girl had been put into the coffin and covered to her chin with a white satin blanket. The new dress was hidden underneath. The mother asked Mrs. Fischer to take off the blanket, only to be told that touching a body after it is laid out proper in a coffin is disturbing to the dead. Mrs. Fischer refused to remove the blanket.
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> The poor mother left disappointed. This last look at her little girl in a fancy dress had been important to her. She wanted that memory but believed what Mrs. Fischer told her. She didn't want to disturb the dead. She didn't want to bother her little girl.
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> It was a brother-in-law that finally became suspicious when the mother told the rest of the family what had happened. He went back to Mrs. Fischer, demanding to view the child's body. Again Mrs. Fischer refused. The brother-in-law knew something was wrong. He stormed out to get the sheriff. The sheriff came back and forced the Fischers to let the family view the body of their little girl. To their horror, there was no body. The Fischers had been cutting bodies off of heads, burying heads, and selling the bodies to the medical school in Birmingham for dissecting. That's what I was told. (Byrd 1982)

Before he passed away, Mr. P.F. Neale, a local resident, told an alternate story. In his account the Fischers were

simultaneously burying the corpses of two men from different families. The undertakers mistakenly confused the burial suits each man was to wear, putting the wrong suit on the two corpses. When the families complained, the Fischers decided not to go to the trouble of undressing the stiff remains and dressing them over again, but simply decapitated the corpses and switched the heads on the bodies. Neale hadn't heard that the Fischers sold bodies to the medical school, but believed it might be true (Neale 1997). This particular account strongly suggests that the Fischer stories are urban legends and indicates the narrator's unfamiliarity with mortuary practice. Burial clothing is generally slit up the back to facilitate dressing the body after rigor mortis (Crissman 1994:33). As one folklore colleague noted, the standard practice would be much less troublesome than decapitation.

What I was able to confirm from these stories is the former status of the building before my family bought it. According to R.L. Polk's City Director), (1926-1945) for the Alabama cities of Florence, Sheffield, Tuscumbia, and Muscle Shoals, the house on the corner of North Cherry and East Tombigbee Street had indeed been a funeral parlor owned by Mary and Oscar Fischer in 1926. Before the house became the property of the Fischers and a funeral home, it had been a private hospital owned by Dr. A.A. Jackson. When the Fischer's adapted the hospital into a funeral establishment, it integrated three functional areas: the clinic, the home, and the chapel into a single unit. The Fischers lived in the upstairs apartments above the chapel. This is similar to the arrangement of funeral homes in other parts of the country (Habenstein and Lamers (1960]1962:436). In 1945 after Oscar Fischer's death, Mary Fischer adapted the funeral parlor into an apartment building she called The Fischer Apartments.

Although I can verify that the house had once been a funeral home, other elements of these stories have been impossible to authenticate. Al-though I have not heard the headless cadaver story repeated by anyone who was not native to the Florence area, these narratives about Oscar and Mary Fischer possess several themes found in widespread urban legends. These themes include: the importance of the burial preparations and the last look, poverty of the deceased, pilfering or disturbing of the corpse, and dissection at a medical school. The original stories told about Oscar and Mary Fischer function as cautionary tales, warning relatives about the un-scrupulous behavior of some undertakers who may be callous enough to cheat the dead and their bereaved families, inviting ghostly retribution to careless or naive relatives. The legend additionally charges families to be wary of the "authority" of the undertaker and to become suspicious of any unconventional behavior (Roemer 1971:9). Ultimately, the stories draw on stereotypes of cold-bloodedness among funeral directors and medical professionals, who heartlessly capitalize on a family's grief and willingly violate taboo (Quigley 1996:202). The stories reinforce the notion that working with the dead acts as a moral dis-inhibitor.

These stereotyped narratives about the Fischers persisted in the Florence area, even though some personal recollections of the undertakers differed remarkably in tone from the legends, remembering the couple to be kind, friendly, and of good reputation. Florence Historian, William L. McDonald, indicated that the stories told about the Fischers were very likely urban legends (1997b). He remarked that his wife as a young lady played piano for a funeral at the Fischers' home and she recalls the Fischers as respectable and gracious.

For most of its history Florence, Alabama, was a small southern community with close ties to rural culture. By the turn of the century Florence had already initiated urban lifestyles with schools, transportation, medical care, shopping, and an established college. The Industrial Revolution came late to Florence, but by the late 1880s a boom of growth hit the area and the population of the city bolted from 1,600 to 6,000 in three years (McDonald 1989:10). Iron furnaces, cotton mills, knitting companies, trolleys, and railroads rapidly changed the character of the town. Even though Florence became an industrialized and more urban area, the deeply rooted conventions of a rural community were still prevalent. People were not far removed from the time when living relatives and friends of the deceased felt the obligation to ready the body for burial. Preparation of the body, or "laying out," had been the traditional duty of family and friends, performed out of love and regard for the deceased. Relatives or close family friends would ritually wash and dress the body before finally placing it in the coffin. Though modern funeral practices lagged in the rural South, professional undertakers assumed many of these duties in larger urban areas by the middle of the nineteenth century (Farrell 1980:148; Wilson 1989:

478-79). One of the duties families retained was seeing that the body was properly attired for the last gaze by the living (Quigley 1996:53). In the leading Fischer legend, the idea that a mother would purchase a special dress for her deceased daughter's funeral adds authenticity to the narrative and provides a clear and understandable motive for the mother to want to view the entire body of her child.

Some of the superstitions about death in the collection edited by Casetta, Hand, and Thiederman (1981) seem to resonate in this story. Although the popular beliefs and superstitions in this collection were recorded in Ohio, many similar superstitions have been observed in the South (cf. Bettis et al. 1978:108-30). Even as recently as the 1980s, I have heard various people express the belief that a corpse should be buried in a new dress or a particularly sentimental outfit (Casetta et al. 1981:1224) and if "the body is not buried complete, it will not reach heaven" (1222). Prevalent superstitions that a cadaver should not be uncovered (1222) also make it seem reasonable that the mother in the narrative would initially obey Mrs. Fischer's authoritative decree about "disturbing" the dead body by removing a decorative coverlet.

In conflict with the superstition about uncovering the body is the tradition of the final look at the corpse, a practice that originated from the fear of premature burial (Coffin 1976). Families conventionally displayed the body for a period of several days to be sure the deceased "had truly passed," reducing the risk of having a loved one buried alive (Habenstein and Lamers [1960]1962:41), and providing a transition for survivors to adjust to the loss of a loved one. This final look also frequently encouraged touching and kissing of the corpse. Psychologists accept these activities as important elements of the grieving process. In his text, The Sacred Rentains, Gary Laderman argues that the last gaze at the corpse became the critical juncture in the funeral ceremony as it emerged in the professional funeral industry in the nineteenth century: ". . . the pleasantly reposed corpse, seemingly at rest and conveying order rather than chaos . . . enhanced the personal memories of the living and allowed them to bid farewell to the dead" (1996:174). Some families photographed the corpse as a last reminder of a departed relative. Among my own family's collection of ancestral photographs is one of a great-grandfather, Samuel Young, laid out in his coffin. Photographing the corpse was a common practice before the turn of the century, particularly when the deceased was a child. Parents had the photographs made and kept them as souvenirs of dead infants. Michael Lesy includes several such photographs of children's corpses in his collection, Wisconsin Death Trip (1973). Sleeping Beauty: Memorial Photography M America (Burns 1990) is a more extensive collection of corpses posed to look as if they are alive. Early photographs of the corpse were often staged portraits that appeared to contradict the death of their subjects. However, by the early twentieth century, subjects were frequently photographed in the coffin (Ruby 1989).

A pivotal element in the narrative is the burial dress the mother must buy for her daughter, a critical item in several urban legends. Special pathos can be evoked in the telling of the story at this point, because in a happier plot the "life crisis" for the daughter would have been marriage rather than death (Roemer 1971:7). The mother should have been helping her daughter to pick out a wedding gown in which to make the ritual transition from daughter to wife rather than burial clothes to make the transition from living to deceased. Still, dressing the corpse was important to southern families, a duty any family would want to see properly performed. A male would often be buried in his Sunday suit, while women of a community frequently made a new dress for a woman who died. Sometimes a family that could afford it would buy new clothes for the corpse (Bettis el al. 1978:109-10).

The several variations of a legend in which a person dies from wearing the clothes of a corpse also reflect the importance of this ritual of dressing the corpse for burial. Because of carelessness and disrespect, burial clothes become fatal to the living because these unfortunate people either wore shrouds that had been made over into dresses or dressed in clothes that had once been worn by a corpse. In some accounts apparel has been stolen from the corpse and resold in a department store (Baker 1982:215; Morgan and Tucker 1987:192). In these legends formaldehyde or death itself infects the clothes like some pathogenic micro-organism, contaminating any living person who wears them. Often the victim of the burial dress is a young woman who buys this apparel for a special occasion such as a prom or wedding, only to die tragically and unwittingly because others had been careless or disrespectful of the burial clothes (Brunvand 1984:112-14). In one variation of the Fischers' headless

cadaver story, an informant suggested to me that the bereaved mother returned the dress to the department store, since her daughter would not be wearing it. However, this informant didn't suggest that the dress had been fatal to anyone else (Gourd 1984). I have not heard anyone else mention this element, which may be original to this particular informant, who was herself working for a large department store at the time of her narration.

Although doubtful of their authenticity, McDonald (1997a) said there were other stories concerning the Fischers and the Tombigbee House. McDonald was not familiar with the narratives told by Byrd, Neale, and Florentine but he knew of other accounts involving the undertakers. In the story McDonald heard, the Fischers were not selling pilfered bodies, but selling the morbid gaze to a public interested in such vulgar entertainment.

> In the 1930s a boy had been beaten to death in a reform school riot. He didn't have any family or anybody willing to pay for a proper funeral, so authorities took his corpse to Oscar Fischer for a cheap burial. The body had been terribly mutilated. Amazed by the sight of the boy's mangled corpse, Oscar Fischer put the boy's body on display, charging ten cents per view. I was a student in the Florence City Schools at the time of this incident. I remember other boys telling about paying a dime each to see the body of the boy who was beaten to death in a reform school. I do remember seeing the photographs of this same boy on display at the corner of Tennes, see and Court Street. (McDonald 1997a)

It is interesting to note that the emphasis in this story shifts from Mary Fischer and preparation of the body for burial, traditionally a woman's job, to Oscar Fischer as showman and entrepreneur. The themes consistent with this story and the other narratives of pilfered corpses are the economic conditions of the deceased (in this case the deceased was without family, as well as indigent) and the undertaker's willingness to take advantage of the corpse for personal gain. This last theme reinforces the stereo-type of the undertaker as a strange and greedy "other" who permits family members to abandon their traditional obligations and detach themselves from death.

The spectatorship involving the corpse of the mutilated boy in the Fischer mortuary was as much a morality tale as a film noir narrative involving the misdeeds of the Fischers. In this instance the victim shares some responsibility for the treatment of his corpse, having been a "bad boy" and imprisoned in the horrid and unstable environment of a reform school. There are several similar, authenticated stories of morticians displaying bodies for morbid spectatorship. In 1911, an Oklahoma under-taker embalmed the body of a train robber killed by a posse and charged the public a nickel to see the body (Quigley 1996:272). The remains of other outlaws or notable persons have also become spectacles for public regard (Dickerson 1982:60). Corpses of side show curiosities were often embalmed for post-mortem exhibition. The legend of the Fischers and their display of the mutilated corpse is reminiscent of what Vanessa Schwartz. identifies as the "pre-cinematic spectacle" of the Paris Morgue, where unidentified dead bodies were put on display for the public to see (1995:298). Open until 1907, the Paris Morgue became a free public recreation, which had the official objective of displaying the anonymous dead so that their identity might be established. However, the public viewing of anonymous corpses came to be more morbid entertainment than civic duty, attracting throngs of curiosity-seekers daily. Again, it was the indigent, unidentified, and unloved corpse that found itself the morose entertainment for the living (Richardson 1988).

The Fischer narratives share marked similarities with other urban legends as well. In the stories of the relative's cadaver, a medical student studying gross anatomy recognizes that one of the bodies the class is dissecting is a deceased relative or friend. Sometimes these stories stress that impoverished families must resort to scurrilous undertakers who allow bodies to be stolen for medical dissection. For example, a story about English novelist Laurence Sterne emphasizes that Sterne's reduced circumstances at his death in 1768 meant he had to be buried in a poor cemetery along with executed criminals. Grave robbers of the period dug up his corpse, put it in a box, and sold it to a university for medical research. During a lecture and dissection, one of Sterne's friends was said to have recognized the body (Brunvand 1984:102).

Tabloid and entertainment media of the era may have also influenced the structure and film noir tone of the Fischer legend. For example, director Robert Wise's film, The Body Snatcher (1945), is a somber story which

was released just after the close of the Fischers' funeral business, the same year Mary Fischer turned the building into apartments. In this film Henry Daniel plays the role of a doctor who bargains with an evil character (portrayed by Boris Karloff) in order to acquire cadavers for his research. The film makes reference to the famous mass murderers of Edinburgh in the late 1820s, William Burke and William Hare. Burke and Hare began murdering for the cadaver trade in 1828, during a period when the dissection of corpses was illegal and they were consequently hard to obtain (Puckle 1926:179). A profitable trade of body-snatching thrived in Edinburgh, and "newly buried corpses were apt to be on the dissection table within twenty-four hours" unless relatives of the deceased were vigilant (Wilson and Pitman 1962:117). Burke and Hare murdered tenants of the boarding house where they lived in association with the manager of that boarding house, Maggie Laird. Unfortunate tenants who got behind on the rent became the selected victims. The duo then sold their corpses to "an unofficial anatomist, Dr. Knox of 10 Surgeon's Square" to recover the rent owed them (Quigley 1996:118). When this scheme became successful, Burke and Hare decided to broaden the business by luring prospective corpses (usually the penurious or prostitutes) into their home for execution, promptly selling the bodies afterward. Burke and Hare managed to continue their business even after one of the students at Surgeon's Square identified a corpse as that of a missing prostitute, a lady he had patronized and who had last been seen in the company, of William Burke. When Burke was finally caught and convicted in 1829, he was publicly executed and dissected (Bolitho 1961:20). Thousands demanded to see the anatomy demonstration. Authorities allowed the general public to view the dissected body afterward, with as many as 40,000 lining up to see the display of I3urke's corpse (Quigley, 1996:295). Though murder was an extreme case of body snatching, grave robbery for medical research was a problem in the United States as well as England during this period (Richardson 1988:54; Coffin 1976:187-94).

There is also a contemporary narrative of the corpse recognized on the surgeon's dissecting table. Among medical school horror legends, Brunvand describes an authenticated narrative which took place in mid-April of 1982 involving the University of Alabama School of Medicine (1984:99). One of the medical students discovered the body of her aunt while dissecting cadavers in a gross anatomy class. However, in this account the aunt had willingly donated her body to scientific study. The corpse had neither been stolen nor murdered. What makes the story horrible is that a friend or relative, who should have seen to the proper burial of the body in a traditional culture, instead recognizes the loved one in the dissecting theatre, where strangers assertively cut it apart. I find it interesting, though most likely coincidental, that this is the same year my brother first heard the story of Oscar and Mary Fischer and their trade in stolen and decapitated corpses. The University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) medical school is the school most often named in the Fischer legend as the recipient of their headless cadavers.[4]

Although I have not often heard the story of the Fischers repeated outside of the Florence area, on occasions when I have told the story to others, the narrative of the headless cadavers has prompted listeners to respond with urban legends conveying related themes. One student followed my narrative of the Fischers with a version of the murdered co-ed, a story in which a young woman narrowly escapes the fate of her roommate, decapitated by a crazed maniac (Edwards 1997).[5] Another student who heard me tell the story of Fischers' headless cadavers replied with a "true account" of how there is still a black market in bodies and body parts today, In her contemporary account of the black market in human body parts, the unscrupulous do not wait to rob the grave, but take what they need from the living.

> That sort of thing still happens in China and some Third World countries. Only now they also need body parts for transplants. I heard about this news story where the Chinese government executes people and takes the internal organs to sell to people in richer countries. This way they boost their gross economy, very gross economy [giggling here]. If you're a tourist you could get drugged and wake up half-dead and missing a kidney. Your kidney gets sold on the black market. (Edwards 1997)

The informant, a media studies major, told this story in the fall semester of 1997, shortly after news reports of human rights violations in China accused officials of executing criminals for body parts. I do not know if this student saw the Primetime Live report (1997) showing video-taped evidence of a Chinese doctor brokering a

deal for a kidney, but the story had been prominently featured on ABC. News reports suggested that Chinese prisoners were grouped by blood type and kept until a recipient match appeared. The prisoner would then be executed and organs harvested from the body.

This student's rendition appears to combine elements of an earlier urban legend and bits from the news report. In the previous "legend of the missing kidney," unscrupulous black-market merchants deal in human organs. They acquire the goods for their enterprise by kidnapping and drugging business travelers or children of impoverished families in order to steal their kidneys, eyes, or other body parts (Campion-Vincent 1990:9; Goska 1997). In some variations the victims are found dead. In other forms of the story the victim wakes up in a hotel bathtub or hospital with a nasty incision where the organ had been removed. Even though my student placed the story in an eastern or Third World country, the setting of the legend can be in any major city, including cities in the United States (Brunvand 1993:149-54).

A final story about the Fischers prior to the close of the funeral parlor circulated in the early 1940s. Again, this stow was not verified, but made claims to authenticity. According to the narrative, a family contracted the Fischers for the funeral services of a baby that had died. The heartbroken parents paid for the most expensive casket the Fischers had in stock and were initially satisfied with the service and the infant's burial. The problem did not come until a few years later, when the family planned to move to another state. The parents wanted to transfer their child's body to a cemetery closer to their new home. According to the legend, when the parents had the child's body disinterred, they discovered their infant had not been buried in the expensive casket they paid for, but in a cheap, pasteboard box, which had decomposed (McDonald 1997b).

Popular culture tends to lump together those who work with dead bodies, so that morticians, funeral home assistants, coroners, doctors, and scientists appear to belong to one mysterious and interconnected group. Probably the most famous of the grave-robber-surgeons in popular media is Mary Wollstonecraft Shelly's Frankenstein who "dabbled among the unhallowed damps of the grave ... [and] collected bones from charnel-houses; and disturbed, with profane fingers, the tremendous secrets of the human frame" ([1831)1988:50). This account of grave robbery for the advancement of medical research has been retold in numerous film and television productions. In the 1957 Hammer film, The Curse of Frankenstein, the first of a long-running series with six sequels, Baron Victor Frankenstein explicitly reprises the theme of beheading the cadaver. "Take the head off," says Dr. Frankenstein after having stolen the corpse of a criminal, "it's of no use to me anyway." The Dr. Frankenstein of this Hammer version then follows the example of Burke and Hare, who killed people for their corpses. Frankenstein decides not to wait for natural death to occur, but instead murders the character of an elderly professor to acquire the brains for his experimental monster. He procures other body parts from the Municipal Charnel House, where he has easy access to the corpses of the poor. The character of Frankenstein's cousin and fiancee, Elizabeth, is the voice of the public's mistrust in medical science when she says, "Our world would be a far better place without research." The effect of the film is to closely interrelate grave robbers and medical scientists in the popular imagination.

Similarly, a less well-known British film, The Anatomist (1961), shows how a surgeon encourages scores of murders when he promotes the thefts of corpses for his experiments. Numerous other movies unite the themes of grave robbery and medical research: Bride of Frankenstein (1935), The Human Monster (1940), Dead Men Walk (1943), Frankenstein's Daughter (1958), Revenge of Frankenstein (1958), The Hands of Orlac (1960), Doctor Blood's Coffin (1961), Frankenstein Created Woman (1967), Mad Doctor of Blood Island (1968), Frankenstein Must Be Destroyed! (1969), Hunchback of the Morgue (1972), Andy Warhol's Frankenstein (1974), Terror Of Frankenstein (1975), Frankenstein (1993), Brainwaves (1982), The Bride (1985) and Deadly Friend (1986). This partial list, which emphasizes films in which doctors, morgue attendants, or amateur scientists pillage corpses for body parts, shows that this theme is significant in popular culture. The motivations for the film characters' experimentation with corpses are insatiable curiosity, greed, and sometimes lust.

Stereotypical media portraits of morticians and funeral home attendants portray these individuals as eccentric characters willing to do anything for money. Even humorous and friendly portrayals, such as those of Henry

Winkler and Michael Keaton in Night Shift (1982), suggest that those who work with dead bodies are willing to attempt the most outlandish of money-making schemes. Other films such as The Loved One (1965) show morticians involved in various conspiracies with complete unconcern and disrespect for the bodies of humans and pets. In another cult classic, The Corpse Grinders (1972), bodies are pilfered and sold to a cat food company, causing house cats to become bloodthirsty.

Sometimes attendants to the dead are perceived as having motives other than monetary gain. In addition to the avarice that would permit them to cheat bereaved families, morgue attendants, funeral home directors, and cemetery workers are often stereotyped as suspect of other misdeeds. Popular culture reinforces the notion that the motives driving the mortician to his/her work are greed, hubris of the scientist, and/or lust for dead bodies. Contemporary state laws give families the right to ask that a representative be present during the embalming of a corpse because of the public fear that many morticians are secret necrophiliacs (Quigley 1996:299).

A more recent movie by Canadian filmmaker Lynne Stopkewich, Kissed (1996), depicts the eccentric relationship between a young woman who is an apprentice in a funeral home and her boyfriend, a medical student. This film is among a type of cinema that Jack Kroll calls "necronoir movies," a cult trend in filmmaking that links the "little death" (orgasm) to the experience of dying (1997:79). In this particular film the lead character becomes an embalmer because of her fascination with death and reveals her obsession for dead bodies. The film was a surprising success as a main-stream movie about necrophilia (Kirkland 1997:17; Bowman 1997:68). Molly Parker, the young funeral home attendant, turns her sexual preference for corpses into an expression of her transcendence. Though based on a short story by Barbara Gowdy, some observers felt the story must have been inspired by a real life character and funeral home employee, Karen Greenlee,' who abducted a corpse instead of delivering it to the cemetery. While the film treats the main character with compassion, it reinforces the notion that those who care for the deceased are those who merit our suspicion.

One of the more popular cult films of the last two decades, Rocky Horror Picture Show (1975), has a lot of campy fun with the stereotypes of the perverted grave-robber surgeon. In this film a lustful Dr. Frankenstein character, Frank N. Furter (Tim Curry), is a transvestite who creates a gorgeous monster from human remains, in order to satisfy his passions. The murdering, transvestite doctor is also bisexual, lightheartedly leaping from bed to bed, regardless of whether the bed contains a man, woman, or reconstructed corpse. Though morticians and funeral directors conscientiously attempt to overcome the stigma attached to their work (Thompson 1991), film characters who work with the dead are clearly willing to violate taboo, blithely transgressing moral as well as legal statutes. Even the medical examiner in Men in Black (1997), though she becomes a central and sympathetic figure, hints that she enjoys secret amusements when working alone with the corpses.

The notion that the undertaker's constant exposure to mortality over-rules fear of death and respect for life is contradicted by research. A comparison of morticians with subjects from other occupations suggests that greater occupational exposure to issues relating to mortality increases rather than decreases sensitivity and fears about mortality (Thorson and Powell 1996). This is not reflected in popular culture. For example, Dead and Buried (1981) portrays an off-center coroner-mortician, Dobbs (played by Jack Albertson) who gleefully cuts up cadavers while listening to 1940s swing music, and in Funeral Home (1982), a character happily restores a corpse in the basement of a former funeral parlor. Popular culture also suggests that people who willingly choose to do such work must be insane. Deranged (1974) renders the story of a farmer and amateur embalmer, who preserves his mother's corpse, then murders and embalms other women to add to his collection. The film was allegedly based on the life of a Wisconsin farmer, Ed Gein, who murdered women and preserved the corpses in the late 1950s. Though not a professional embalmer, Gein's murderous interest in the corpse and attempts at amateur embalming made him the inspiration for several movies, including Psycho (1960) and Texas Chainsaw Massacre (1971) (Gollmar 1981).

Other popular films have protracted common fears that yoke together doctors, hospital staff, morticians, and even big business into one cold-blooded bureaucracy that preys on the innocent public. For example, grisly thrillers like Doctor Blood's Coffin (1961), Coma (1978), and the television movie, Donor (1990) suggest that

the corpse is a lucrative commodity eagerly harvested by those in power. Related to the subject of transplants in many films is the belief that the soul of a deceased person cannot rest peacefully if the body is not buried whole (Cassetta et al. 1981:1222). Mad Love (1935), The Hands of Orlac (1960), and The Hands of a Stranger (1962) all depict the story of a demented doctor who transplants a murderer's hands onto those of a pianist. Unluckily this musician acquires the urge for manslaughter with his new appendages. In Body Parts (1991), which reprises the same Hands of Orlac theme, several body parts of a homicidal maniac are grafted onto different patients with grisly results. These movies suggest that the impulses or spirit of the donor reside in the transplanted organs. The implied moral is that any corpse should be allowed to rest in peace. These movies suggest that even the bodies of executed killers should not be used for medical advancement.

A few media portraits of medical examiners, coroners, and morticians contradict the stereotype of the immoral mortician and the egotistical grave-robber-surgeon. One popular television portrait of a medical examiner showed how those who handle the dead can play important roles, using their expertise in the examination of bodies to solve puzzles or uncover clues to crimes that would otherwise be missed. Television's Quing (1976) establishes admirable professionalism in scenes of post mortem examinations as the main character, a medical examiner, treats dead characters with high regard and dignity, often avenging his clients by revealing clues to heinous crimes. Similarly, Kay Scarpetta, the Virginia Medical Examiner of Patricia Cornwell's novels, is treated as a serious, cultured woman. Scarpetta allows readers to accompany her into the morgue where the corpse reveals its secrets to her "inches at a time" (1995:53). Aside from the few positive portrayals, what is clear from these media portrayals of corpses and their caretakers is that since we no longer care for the dead ourselves, those who are in the business of caring for the dead seem mysterious and loathsome. The business of death and its rituals have been exiled to the discourse of popular culture, and are often portrayed with hysteria.

The common expectation would be that a house with a notorious his-tory associated with the dead must be haunted.[7] This has not been the case with the Tombigbee property. One informant who knew the legends of the Fischers and still lived in the building for more than five years did tell me that she sometimes had a "creepy feeling" come over her. However, this only happened while she was worldng in an upstairs storage room my brother had helped her convert into a dark room for her photography. This was in an area of the house that would have been the Fischers' living quarters. In her own downstairs apartment she said she felt only snug and peaceful (Gourd 1984).[8] My brother spent his bachelorhood in the Tombigbee House very comfortably. He never reported any incident of haunting or unnatural disturbance in the eight years he lived there. Be-yond the usual lost keys and the occasional frozen water pipe, the only complaints ever reported from tenants were from two tenants who argued that they were bothered by the building's history after living there a few months. One tenant claimed he had not been told that the house had been a funeral parlor before he signed the lease and demanded that he be allowed to break his lease and move out without forfeiting his deposit.[9] For some more "artistically" minded tenants, the legends of the building's former owners have been a point of pride; the building itself is a conversation piece. Cohabitation with a notorious legend might be fun for awhile, but it isn't a cozy thing with which to live. The tenants in the Tombigbee apartments rarely consider the house a permanent residence. However, this doubtless has as much to do with the life stage and characteristics of college-age residents as with the building's history.

The stories that continue to circulate about Oscar and Mary Fischer may be attributed in part to what Ben Singer observed as a rise in sensationalism following the upsurge of manufactured stimuli in the first part of the twentieth century. The barrage of change, the chaotic, fragmented, and disorienting turbulence of urban life brought with it a need for the thrill of modern diversion, "sensational accounts of anything strange, sordid, or shocking" (1995:88). Scandalous stories in film, newspaper, and folklore mentally prepared the urban resident for the shock of city life. The early atrocities credited to the Fischers might be due in part to the social trauma of shifting from rural to urban customs in Florence. The legends betray the anguish in this social transformation about a lost rural culture and yearning for a time of more self-sufficient families. The legends may reflect a deep-seated resentment of the standardization and secularization of the professional funeral industry as customs like “sitting up,” with the corpse and other old-fashioned rituals gave way to modern practices (Wilson 1989:479). Modernity relieved families of the more intimate duties of caring for their deceased. It also separated

families from the intimate knowledge of mortality and compelled them to send their dead to be handled by strangers. Finally, it facilitated the discourse of death to proliferate in urban legends and popular culture portrayals.

Similar concerns about adapting to the rapid changes of a modern world keep the Fischer legends relevant for contemporary audiences. In an age where medical science has fogged the boundaries between life and death, the Fischer legends reverberate with more recent, controversial questions. When is it "right" for science to use human remains for study, experiment, and transplant? For current audiences, the Fischer legends disclose the social and ethical unease presented by rapid scientific advances. How can we be certain that remains are used for humanitarian purposes and not private profit? Just as science has confused the boundary between life and death, the margins between the public good and private gain may not always be so clear.

Finally, it is interesting to consider the dynamic relationship between news accounts, popular culture, and urban legends about this subject matter. Popular media and oral narratives exist as parallel and interconnected systems of expression and statement, which mirror social meaning and value. Themes which resonate in the popular imagination are likely to be appreciated in each arena, receiving new emphasis as real life observations and media accounts are reprised in popular culture or passed orally within a community. At each junction between narrator and public, an account receives personal, creative interpretation. Even the local raconteur, telling and shaping a narrative to fit a particular audience, becomes an unselfconscious artist, distributing the subconscious anxieties and dramatic realities of American life.

NOTES

1. Oscar and Mary Fischer are pseudonyms. In order to prevent any distress the publishing of these oral narratives might cause, interviewees have also been assigned pseudonyms.
2. Blane Edwards lived nearly a decade in the Tombigbee House very comfortably in spite of the building's history. When my brother married and had children, he moved to a more family-oriented neighborhood. The Tombigbee Street area had gone into a decline, becoming notorious for "bohemian" living. In the late 1990s, when a real estate developer began to buy up and renovate the old estate houses, the nature of the neighborhood and its reputation improved. However, as of 1997, it is still largely an area populated by college students, young adults, and a few remaining elderly residents.
3. Interviewees Mr. Byrd and Mr. Neale passed away before the writing of this article. Ms. Florentine, a long-time resident of Tombigbee Street, now resides in a nursing home in the Florence area.
4. When I was applying to UAB for a teaching job in the Department of Communications in 1983, I found myself compelled to tell some of the faculty at my interview the story of Oscar and Mary Fischer's headless cadavers and the UAB connection. Luckily, this poor judgment on my part didn't stop them from offering me the job.
5. The student who told this story believed it happened "several years ago" at North Carolina State University and claimed to know several people who knew the surviving co-ed. However, similar stories have appeared in collections of urban legends. See, for example, the roommate's death story in Duncan Emrich's Folklore on the American Land (1972:335).
6. An interview with Karen Greenlee by Jim Morton reinforces the stereotype of misconduct among those in the funeral profession. Greenlee is quoted as affirming public suspicions regarding funeral home attendants: "Necrophilia is more prevalent than most people imagine. Funeral homes just don't report it" (Morton 1990:28-35).
7. In 1992 while in Elizabeth City gathering video interviews for a documentary, Wondrous Events (1994), I interviewed the owner of the Cropsey House. This ante-bellum home was the setting for some events in the notorious legend of Nell Cropsey, a young woman murdered by her boyfriend. The owner of the house expressed some of the many difficulties of living in a house that is "notorious" rather than simply historical. Subsequent to the making of the documentary her family sold the house. Bland Simpson's account of the Nell Cropsey legend, The Mysteg of the Beautiful Nell Cropsey (1993), is another example of the interplay between a news event, oral narrative, and local legend.
8. Not wishing to upset residents unnecessarily or have them begin looking for events they had not observed on

their own, I have not actively sought out stories of odd occurrences or unexplained events in the Tombigbee house. I have not found any instance of a ghost story associated with the house, even though the Florence area is moderately active with local ghost stories.
9. According to my brother, the building's history became a convenient excuse for this tenant to break his lease and move in with a new girlfriend, which was the real motivation for moving out However, it cannot be denied that some people might become squeamish at the thought of living in a building that had once been a funeral home.

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